

TIM O K I A N D E R

WORK SMARTER ~~NOT HARDER~~

18 Productivity Tips
That Boost Your Work
Day Performance



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Free Gift

I have some good news for you! Before you start reading this free book, I have also created another freebie which you may like.

You see, there is one particular tool that you use on daily basis and while it can be a very effective one, it can also be a huge source of distraction and wasted time. Yes, I'm talking about e-mail!

This is why I have created a special report for you:

E-mail Productivity Secrets: Tools and Best Practices for Skyrocketing Your E-mail Productivity

It shows some very interesting tools that help you to increase your e-mail productivity, while teaching you best practices and habits that make your e-mail usage more effective. While the tools are mainly geared toward those who use Gmail, the best practices and principles can be applied by anyone, regardless of the e-mail client.

To download this free report, just click the link below.

<http://www.productivesuperdad.com/inbox-hero/>

INBOX HERO

Tools, Habits and Best Practices for
Skyrocketing Your E-mail Productivity



TIMO KIANDER

How to Read This Book

There is not a particular way to read this book. You can either start from the beginning or pick your chapters randomly.

The more important thing is to actually implement the advice in your everyday life. Only that way will you learn which ideas work for you and which one don't.

Keep this book available, so if you want to refresh your memory or pick up some new tips to improve your work day performance.

Who is This Book For?

This book is geared towards office workers (both at home or in a cubicle). While some tips are perhaps geared more towards those who work in a normal day job, all the advice can be applied to home-based businesses too.

Even if you don't work in those mentioned environments, you can still pick up some interesting tips to improve your everyday performance.

Introduction

I became interested in time management back in 2007, after reading David Allen's book, *Getting Things Done*¹. By reading his book, a new world opened and I have been a student of time management and personal productivity ever since.

After reading plenty of other productivity material from books and blogs, I finally started applying the strategies I had learned to my personal life. Later I took this knowledge to my work days too. Some of the advice worked fine (checking e-mail less was one of those things), while some other tricks increased my stress levels more than they actually helped me (namely, the 2-minute rule).

It's now 2015 and I have learned a lot more about time management. Not only do I write books about it, but I also train companies about it from time to time.

This book contains the best productivity strategies I have learned over the past few years. No matter if you are working from home or in a cubicle, you can apply these strategies to your work day and take your performance to another level.

This book is a short read, because I value your time. And if you feel that there was a strategy or tip that I should have included here, don't hesitate to send me an e-mail at timo@productivesuperdad.com.

I'm always willing to learn more about new ways to keep your productivity levels up.

Work Smarter Not Harder: 18 Productivity Tips That Boost Your Work Day Performance

If there is one word that describes today's work environment, it's "busy." Consider the image of people running from one meeting to another, unable to focus on their assignments because they are distracted, working overtime to meet their deadlines, and buried by a constant avalanche of e-mail messages.

Unfortunately, in a situation like this, being productive and creative is not even remotely possible. If all you can do is to barely make it through your work day by putting out fires, what happens to your actual work assignments? You guessed it; you don't have time for them.

I hope that with this small book, you can get those productive moments back into your work day. Sure, you will still be doing the busywork, but let the productive and focused work be the number #1 priority from now on.

The Basic Blocks of Productivity

Before you read the actual productivity tips, there is something important worth understanding about personal productivity. And the best way to explain it is by using a metaphor.

Personal productivity is like a building. Now, I'm not an expert on building houses and such but I know this: in order for the building to stand tall and last through various weather conditions, it has to have a solid foundation. Otherwise, the building will collapse.

The foundation has to be solid too, when a person's personal productivity is concerned. If the foundation is missing or one part of it fails, personal productivity becomes just a distant dream.

To have a solid foundation for personal productivity, the following blocks must be in place:

- Proper mindset
- Physical activity
- Optimum nutrition
- Enough sleep

Let's go briefly through each of them, one-by-one.

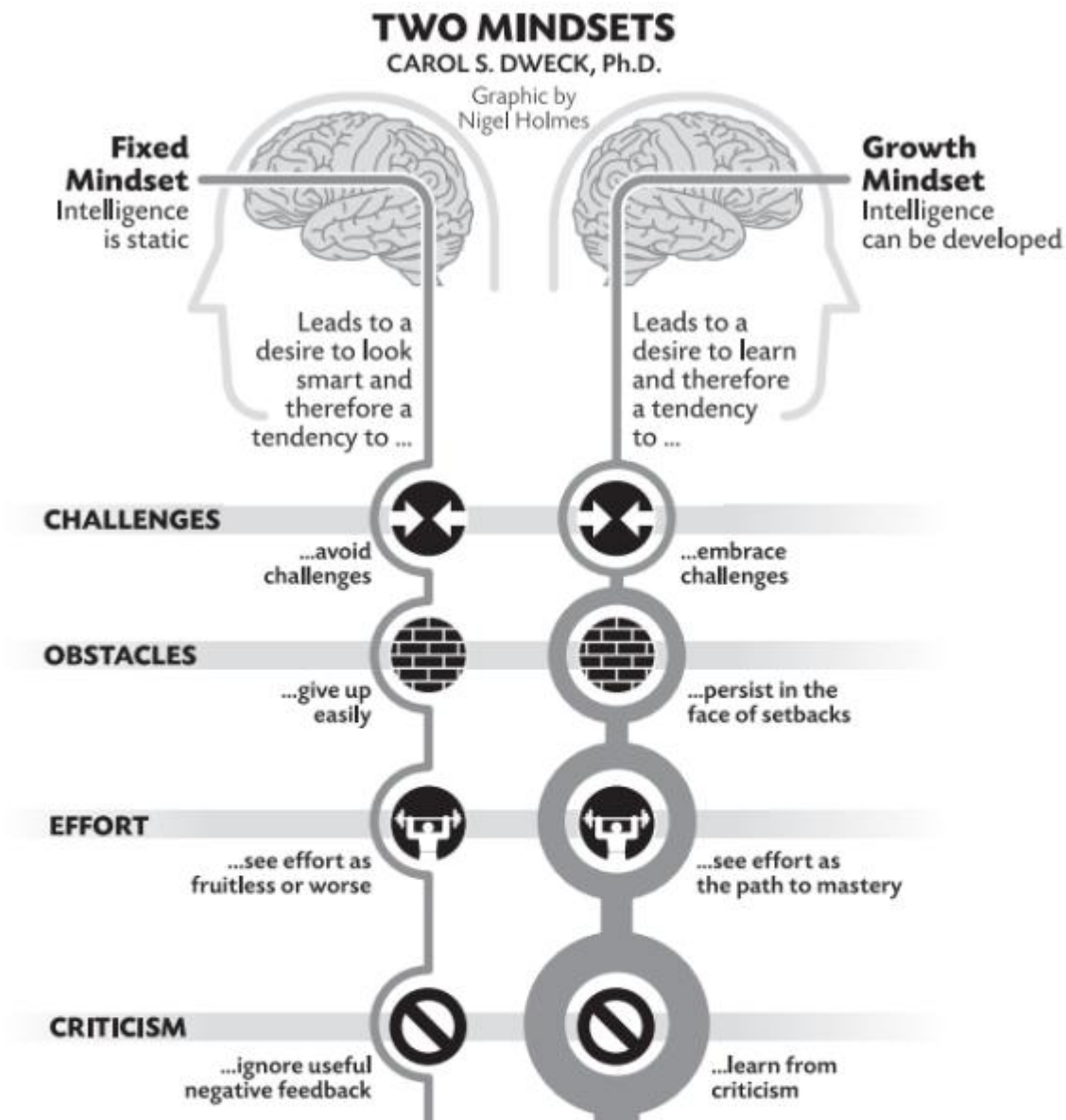
Proper mindset

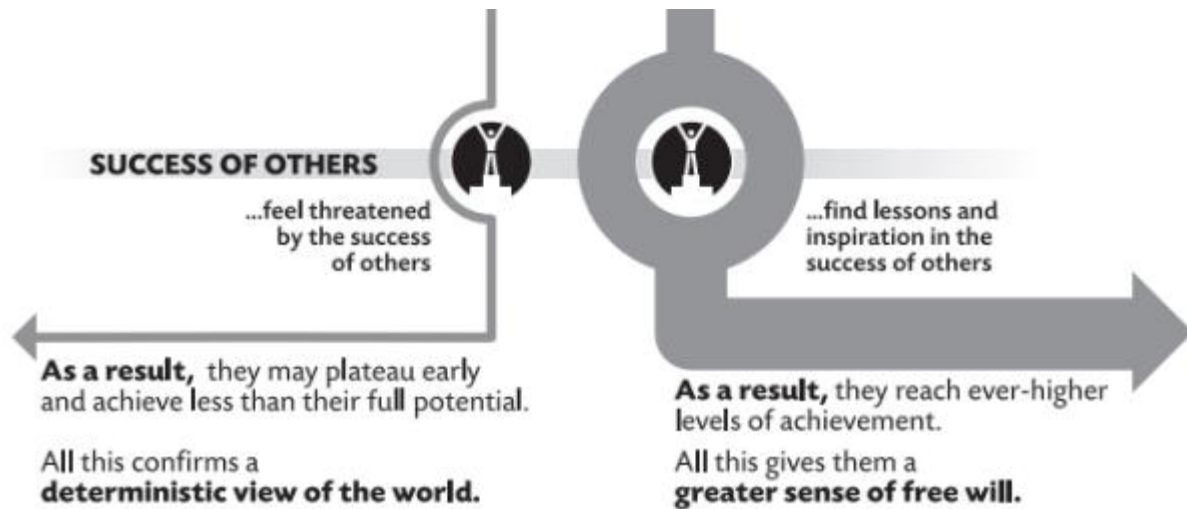
Your mind is a very powerful part of you and through your mind, you form your view of the world. Your mind also plays a very powerful role in your productivity, since it forms attitudes and these attitudes can eventually turn into action or inaction.

There has been plenty written about how the mind works and how to utilize it better, but if there is one book that I would recommend on the subject, it would be Carol Dweck's excellent *Mindset*².

According to Professor Dweck, you can either have a fixed mindset or a growth mindset. While the people with fixed mindsets let their intelligence and talent define them, the growth mindset oriented people know that with hard work and practice, they can be good at anything.

If you'd like to learn more about the differences between fixed and growth mindsets, take a look at the infographic³. It illustrates the core differences between these two in a clear manner.





Text by Carol Dweck, graphic by Nigel Holmes

Physical activity

I remember a time a few years ago when I wasn't as physically active as I am today. All I used to do was drag myself home from work, lie on the couch and watch some television while being half-asleep. But once I changed my habits and started exercising, my life changed for good.

Many aspects of my life changed thanks to exercising regularly. For instance, I noticed that my energy levels were much higher than before. This finding wasn't just my imagination; even a study⁴ by University of Stockholm can back it up.

I also noticed that with increased energy I became happier and more creative too. For instance, I was able to come up with solutions to many work-related issues when I was in the middle of my exercise sessions.

Exercising offers some other benefits to your life, too. For instance, you can control your weight⁵, improve your mood, and even enjoy better sleep⁶.

Since I don't know you, I can't give you any detailed exercise plan, nor can I suggest what type of exercise to do in the first place. Rather, consult your doctor to get proper advice for your situation.

Optimum nutrition

In my opinion, the topic of nutrition has become too complex nowadays. There are just too many rules to follow and it seems that common sense has

gone out the window altogether. Besides, since all the diets claim to be the best, how can you actually pick the eating style that fits you the best?

Unfortunately, there are lots of myths⁷ regarding dieting, as well as an illusion that one “perfect” diet should fit every single person. While the latter statement would make things very simple, the truth is that one diet doesn’t fit all⁸.

There are foods that can make you more (or less) productive⁹, and paying attention to your diet¹⁰ will have a dramatic impact on how you feel and how energized you are.

I’m not an expert on nutrition, so I won’t tell you what foods to eat and which ones to avoid. The best advice is – once again – to consult your doctor first. He/she can recommend what type of diet to follow and which foods are the safest for you to eat.

Enough sleep

All the previous elements that we have discussed so far are very important when the productivity is concerned. But if proper sleep is the missing block in your (productivity) foundation, then you are still in great trouble.

I remember the years I worked as a sleep-deprived web developer in my day job. Most afternoons were difficult for me as I had hard time focusing or remembering even the most basic things related to programming. Sometimes it took me much more time to solve a simple programming problem than what it would have if I had been fully rested. Clearly, I wasn’t as productive as I should have been.

Without proper sleep, you are doing yourself a disservice. For instance, lack of sleep has not only been linked to poor performance and alertness¹¹, but also to weight gain, Type 2 Diabetes, and memory problems¹².

So how much sleep do you need then? There isn’t one particular figure that fits all. Although getting 8 hours of uninterrupted sleep is often touted as the magic number for adults, this common knowledge has now been debunked¹³.

At the same time, there is no single right way to sleep. While some might sleep their nights in one continuous block, it’s normal for some to get up many times per night¹⁴.

As you now understand, our sleeping patterns and amount of sleep depends on the person. But how do you discover the amount of sleep you personally need? You determine this by doing a test.

First, pick a time when you know you don't have to wake-up early (like, during a vacation). Then, sleep as much as you need, without setting an alarm to wake you up. If you are sleep deprived, take care of your sleep debt¹⁵ first.

After waking up without an alarm clock, notice how many hours you slept, while feeling refreshed and rested.

One way to analyze your sleep even further (with the help of a doctor or a sleep specialist), is to have a sleep diary¹⁶ for a couple of weeks, where you record various metrics related to sleep such as the time you went to bed, when you woke up, and how you felt after waking up.

Once you have finished the test and taken this data to a specialist, you'll have a better understanding of how much sleep you need.

You might also consider some other tips to improve the quality of your sleep, like the following:

- Wash the linens frequently.
- Make sure your bedroom is dark and quiet enough. If necessary, buy an eye mask and earplugs.
- Keep the bedroom decluttered.
- Adjust the temperature¹⁷ of your room, if possible (the right temperature depends on the person).
- Avoid doing work in the bedroom (bedroom is just for sleeping and sex).
- Avoid drinking coffee or exercising just before going to bed.
- Avoid heavy meals just before going to bed (a light snack is OK though).
- Try to find a regular sleeping rhythm that you follow every day.
- Turn off the TV and computer well before going to bed.

- Read a book (but nothing too inspiring).

18 Productivity Tips That Actually Make a Difference

Now that you know about the foundation of productivity, it's time to jump into more detailed strategies to make your work days more effective and satisfying.

1. Have a powerful start to your day

Very often we claim to be too busy, especially when it comes to taking care of ourselves. It seems that our lives are filled by the demands of other people and unfortunately we tend to put off the “me time” until someday in the future.

But did you know that there is a certain part of the day which can give you the personal time you need? This time is the morning time.

By learning to get up earlier, you can add more flexibility to your morning and enjoy a better start to your day.

So how do you get up earlier, then? Well, it starts with a decision, followed by a target time and commitment to your plan.

For instance, you could set an objective to get up 30 minutes earlier than what you currently do. But rather than switching to this new wake-up time all at once, make this change in smaller increments. At the same time, commit to this change by being consistent with your new wake-up schedule (in other words, keep executing your new wake-up plan every day).

Stephanie Silberman, author of *The Insomnia Workbook*^{[18](#)}, recommends^{[19](#)} changing your sleep cycle in 15-minute increments at a time, for 3-4 nights. Once you are comfortable with this small change, make another adjustment to your wake-up time.

When you switch to earlier wake-ups, there is still one point that you have to pay attention to: the time you go to bed. Otherwise you end up making the same mistake I did. Even if I woke up early, I didn't change my bed-going time accordingly and this made me a sleep-deprived “office zombie.”

It's easier to know when to hit the bed when you know how much sleep you approximately need (see the previous section). For instance in my case, I know that if I want to get up refreshed at 6:45am, I'll have to go to bed around 11pm to get enough sleep.

Once you have successfully adopted this new schedule (both getting to bed earlier and waking up earlier), take full advantage of your new-found “me time” by investing in yourself. For instance, you could:

- Meditate
- Read a self-help book
- Exercise
- Write
- Build your business

One thing that can be a great factor in deciding how you spend your time in the mornings is to know the goal you are trying to reach. Then, dedicate most of your early morning hours to this activity.

For instance, when I was working a day job, one of the goals I had was to pass a certification exam related to my job. So I spent my early mornings studying for the exam, which I eventually passed. Or when my focus was on racing marathons and triathlons, I made sure to exercise before hitting the office.

In my personal experience, these early morning sessions are the major factor why I have achieved a lot in my life (I'm fit, I'm an published author, I have built a following on my blog to thousands ...). You can take advantage of these early hours too, to get closer to your goals and dreams.

2. Understand your optimal working rhythm

Whether you work in an office – for yourself or for someone else – you rarely just go to work and sit there for 8 consecutive hours and then go home (working like this is ineffective and just plain dangerous![20](#)).

To improve your focus and effectiveness, try to find an optimum working style; one that suits you (and your job description) the best. There are few ways to do this, listed below:

- **Pomodoro technique**

This popular technique breaks the work sessions into 25-minute chunks (one 25-minute session = 1 Pomodoro), while taking a 5-minute break between sessions. Once you have completed four pomodori (4 x 25-minute sessions plus 5-minute breaks), you can take a longer 15-30 minute break.

- **90-minute intervals**

Our bodies work in 90-minute cycles[21](#) – whether we are asleep or we are awake. This is what sleep researcher Nathan Kleitman found in his studies decades ago. These 90-minute intervals are the peak time of our focus and productivity, followed by a lower-energy phase of 20 minutes.

To respect this natural rhythm inside us, work in 90-minute blocks, followed by a 20-minute break.

- **52-17**

A study conducted by the Draugiem Group, with the help of DeskTime, an app for tracking one's work habits, found out that the ideal work length/break ratio for the most productive people was 52/17[22](#).

In other words, after working for 52 minutes, the people took a 17-minute break. This result was based on the analysis of the top 10% most productive employees.

- **Your personal one**

If any of the previous models didn't fit your style of working, define your own schedule. After all, what really matters the most is that you can focus

on the right tasks and make progress on them.

Before I conclude this section, there are still two things to remember regarding your work block length.

First, you want to make sure, you actually do something energizing when you take a break between your working sessions. For more ideas on what to do during your breaks, see tip #11 in this book.

All the strategies listed in this tip assume that you use a timer. This way you know when to take a break and get up from your computer. The timer I have used is called GrooveOtter²³, and it has worked well for my needs.

3. Keep distractions at bay

Distractions are all around us and if you are not careful, they could ruin your whole work day. That's why it's important to protect your precious hours, so that you can actually work on the things you planned to do.

There are three types of distractions you could be exposed to during your workday:

- Communication tools
- Other people
- Internal distraction

Next, let's go through these distraction types in more detail.

Communication tools

Communication tools are things like the Internet, e-mail, phone, instant messaging, and social media. Although they are part of a modern work day and their purpose might be good, they can also be a huge source of distraction.

To begin controlling your communication distractions, you have to set clear boundaries.

For instance, set two to three time windows with a length of 15-30 minutes per day, when you handle all the communication- related tasks at once, whether it's calls, checking your e-mails, or interacting on social media.

When the pre-determined time has passed, close your client application (e-mail, social media or instant messaging) and open them again only when the next pre-determined time window comes. Keep your phone muted while you work.

Of course, setting strict boundaries when you handle all your communication might not work for everyone. This depends naturally on the work you do.

Other people

Another source of distraction is the people you work with. If you work from home, the interruptions could be caused by family members and if you work at the office, it could be your colleagues.

To control this kind of distraction, you can do three things:

- Make “do not disturb” requests
- Change your location
- Engage in random tricks

The first way is to kindly let the other people in the office know that you should be able to concentrate on your task, but you can't since the current noise is preventing you from doing this. If you have made this nice request a couple of times but hasn't had any effect on your working conditions, you can always take it to your boss. Perhaps he/she can help to pacify the situation?

If you are working from home, talk to your family members and let them know that you are doing focused work at certain hours. You could also leave a note on the refrigerator door, reminding them about your working hours and when you shouldn't be disturbed.

The second way to deal with distraction is by changing the work location entirely. If you work at an office and want full concentration on your tasks, you could book a meeting room for your assignments.

Then again, nothing prevents you to take this advice even further. For instance, you could leave the office temporarily to do your work elsewhere (if this is OK with your boss), if there is no meeting room available.

Understand that sometimes productive work doesn't always require an office desk, but it can also be done:

- In a coffee shop
- In a public library
- Outside in nature, if weather permits

If you decide to leave the office to do your work elsewhere, make sure to communicate with your colleagues or family members first that you are

working outside of your regular work environment. This way they know how to contact you in case of emergency.

Finally, there are certain tricks that you can try, if nothing else works.

First, you could buy some noise-isolating²⁴ headphones to block the noise around you. And even if you don't listen to anything through those headphones, there is another surprising benefit to this: people leave you alone because they think you are working. In fact, you can achieve this same effect even with regular headphones, so no expensive investment is needed.

I experienced this effect when I was working in a cubicle. Since the company I worked for took advantage of virtual meetings as much as possible, this meant that you participated in a majority of meetings by sitting in your own workspace with your headphones on.

Eventually, people learned that a person with headphones on was most likely in a meeting, so he/she shouldn't be disturbed. Obviously, I took advantage of this association even if I wasn't participating in a virtual meeting. So just putting my headphones on was a signal to others not to disturb me.

You could also send a clear signal to your colleagues by putting a "Do not disturb" sign in your workspace or to your office door when you want full focus on your work.

Finally, if you have to do your work at the office and you cannot find any other way to work with full concentration, simply show up to the office earlier than others.

I tried this option couple of times and it really made a difference to my focus. Thanks to my positive experiences with this strategy, I applied it every time I had to get some important work done.

Internal distraction

There is also another type of distraction that makes us go off-track, and that's internal distraction. Internal distraction is basically the thoughts and ideas that interrupt us whenever we are trying to do productive work.

First of all, to battle the internal distraction, try to ensure that you get enough sleep. The sleepier you feel, the easier it is for your thoughts to start

to wander.

Then, implement a distraction list habit in your daily work. The distraction list is nothing more than just a piece of paper that sits on your desk. Then, whenever you come across a new idea or thought that you want to remember later on, just write it down.

Once the work day is over, process the paper, either by taking care of the items at once or by scheduling them to your task list for a later date.

4. Never start your day unplanned

Implement a habit of planning your day in advance. This way you know exactly what you should be focusing on when your work day starts. Also, you don't have to operate from memory, since all the necessary tasks are laid out in front of you.

I have to admit that making a daily task list has been one of the biggest improvements to my productivity. Since I know the tasks I should be doing, I don't waste my time on unessential stuff.

To get started with this new habit, just pick a piece of paper or choose a task list program²⁵ for storing your task list. Then, write down three important tasks for the next day and prioritize them to the beginning of the work day. Also, add some lower-priority tasks to your list too, to make sure you make progress on every level (not just on those important tasks).

Once you have picked the tasks you are going to do, do some necessary prep work related to them. For instance, you could make sure that all the documents are easily accessible the next day when you start working. Or, if you are about to write something, you could plan the outline the day before.

With this extra step, you can get started with your tasks much quicker. Besides, you can focus on working on your assignments instead of wasting time finding the necessary materials or items you need.

There are still two other things you could do to make sure your task list is as effective as possible.

First, make your list closed. This is what Mark Forster, the author of *Do It Tomorrow*²⁶, suggests in his book.

A closed task list means that you decide not to add any new tasks to your list, even if something new comes up in the middle of the next day. To mark the list as closed, all that is required is to draw a solid line under the last item on your task list.

However, if you have an open list, you end up clearing tasks off your list while adding some new ones to it as the day goes by. Not only do you make it harder to get all the tasks cleared off by the end of the day, this practice is also demotivating; no matter how hard you work, the number of tasks never

decreases (and sometimes you even end up with more tasks on your list than what you started out with).

Drawing a physical line after the last task works fine with a paper-based task lists. However, with a task list application, you have to make this line “virtual.” In other words, you make a decision to not add any more tasks to your list in the middle of the work day.

The second thing is to “become a pessimist” when your tasks are concerned. For instance, I’m a very positive and optimistic person by nature, but a bit of pessimism helps me with my task list planning for the next day.

When I notice that my task list is going to be filled with too many tasks for one day, I say to myself, “Well, I don’t necessarily have time for this task. And perhaps it’s the same thing with this other task too.”

With this approach, I’m deliberately cutting the number of tasks off my next day’s list, while increasing the likelihood of finishing all the planned work the next day.

If you decide to apply the previous strategy, just make sure to have some back-up work ready, in case you manage to clear your list before the work day ends.

For instance, right now (at the time of writing this paragraph) it seems that I’ll be able to clear my task list for today well ahead of time. But since I still have some extra time left, I’ll keep writing this report a little bit more.

5. Drink water

Drinking water has many health benefits^{[27](#)}, including making your skin look good, helping you with weight loss, and keeping your stress levels down^{[28](#)}.

But there are some productivity benefits too. A study made by The University of East London found that drinking water improves your brain performance by 14%^{[29](#)}.

So how much water should you drink on a daily basis? The recommendation^{[30](#)} varies and clearly this depends on the person. But what's important is that you have a glass of water sitting on your desk, reminding you to take a sip every once in a while.

Make a decision to drink more water, starting today. Your body and brain will thank you for that!

6. Identify the most important tasks and do them first

I briefly touched on this topic already in tip #4. Yet, it's worth understanding that the sooner you do the most important tasks of the day, the sooner they actually get done. Otherwise, there is a greater risk that something else comes up and you end up postponing your tasks.

So how can you define an important task then? Consider these options:

- The long-term effect of a task
- The short-term effect of a task

In the first case, a task – when completed – can have a profound effect on your future. Most likely, these kinds of tasks are the ones which you should focus on now, even if the results materialize later (working on writing your book might not make you famous today, but the project could have a long-lasting impact on your life and career).

The short-term effect can also play a big role, when prioritization is concerned. Even if a task might not be significant to you, other people may still rely on your input, before they can move ahead with their own projects.

For instance, deployment of a new server system for your client is stalled as long as you are not able to tweak the configuration of a server. And since your client hurries the deployment, this task should be a high priority one for you too.

So pay attention to the important tasks when you plan your task list for the next day and prioritize them at the top of your list.

7. Ask these questions regarding your next meeting

The intention of a meeting is usually a good one; it's a great way to share ideas and thoughts between you and other people.

Unfortunately, meetings can also be a time suck, eating your time from productive work. So rather than accepting every meeting request that comes your way, figure out the answers to the following questions first:

- **Do I have to attend in the first place?**

Ask the meeting organizer if your attendance is necessary at all? You may find that you have been invited just in case and that attendance is not required.

- **Is it possible to attend virtually?**

In the recent years, virtual meetings have replaced many traditional face-to-face meetings. There are many benefits to virtual meetings, including saving time and money on travelling.

Ask the meeting organizer if it's possible to attend virtually. Although the experience is different than meeting someone face-to-face, it's still a great way to gather together and make progress on your tasks.

- **Is this meeting needed in the first place?**

The big question is of course, is the meeting needed at all? If you have doubts about the coming meeting, ask this question directly to the organizer, while defining why the meeting should be cancelled.

- **Is there an agenda?**

Without an agenda, there is a great risk of letting the meeting go off-topic. Naturally, this wastes everyone's precious time.

If the meeting organizer doesn't send you an agenda with the meeting invitation, ask him/her to send it the participants before the meeting.

- **Is it possible to limit the duration of the meeting?**

If you give a meeting two hours, you're likely to fill that whole time with discussion whether or not it's relevant to the meeting's topic. Instead, why not give the meeting a shorter time allotment, so that it can be held faster?

For instance, I was a software developer in my previous job. To keep all the team members up-to-date on the latest project developments, we had daily 15-minute meetings at the end of the work day. Since everyone knew that the meeting was going to be short, people didn't slip to off-topic matters and the meetings were in fact finished in 15 minutes.

- **Is it possible to test the meeting technology before the actual meeting?**

This question is important for anyone organizing a face-to-face meeting. What happens too often is valuable meeting time is wasted because the technology is not working. For instance, something might be wrong with the meeting room's Internet connection or the video projector may not be working properly.

If possible, try to make sure that all these things work before the meeting. This way you save yourself a lot of headaches since the meeting can start right away, without having to find the "tech guy" to make everything work first.

8. Batch similar tasks together

A very common practice is to check one's e-mail inbox on a frequent basis. Sometimes there aren't any messages when you do the check, but sometimes there are, making you open the message and process it. Then, after you have dealt with the message, you return back to work.

Previously I had this kind of relationship with e-mail, until I found a much better one. Instead of peeking into my inbox every now and then, I started batch-processing all the e-mails at once, during pre-determined time windows.

In other words, I picked 3 times per day (once in the morning, once in the mid-afternoon, and once in the evening), when I processed all my e-mails at once, in 15-30 minute bursts. I understand that this kind of schedule might not fit everyone, so you should adjust it based on your individual needs.

This same batching strategy could be used elsewhere too, not just with your e-mail messages:

- Processing regular mail
- Making phone calls
- Processing your social media messages
- Having all those quick meetings bundled into one (instead of having 5-minute meetings throughout the week, have a one bigger meeting which deals with all the matters at once.)

9. Process your e-mail effectively

I already talked about e-mail processing a bit in tip #8. However, this topic is so big, it deserves a section of its own.

The fact is that e-mail can definitely be a time suck. If you keep checking e-mails as soon as they arrive in your inbox, your work day become scattered and your ability to focus on your important tasks weakens.

To prevent this happening, take a more organized approach in dealing with your e-mail messages:

- Define your e-mail checking times. For instance, this could be 2-3 times per day, 30 minutes each. If possible, try to avoid checking e-mail first thing in the morning, since it's very likely you'll get off-track quickly. In other words, you could end up working on totally different tasks than what you originally intended to.
- Open your e-mail client only when you check your e-mail. Otherwise, keep it shut.
- Turn-off the automatic notifications in your e-mail client (how you do this varies from the e-mail application).
- Let others know about your e-mail checking routine, so that you can set the expectations right. For instance, you can create an auto-reply message saying that you check e-mails only three times per day at pre-determined times.

Create a routine which you use every time you check e-mail. For instance:

- Once you open your inbox, scan any messages that you can delete or archive right away. If these messages are newsletters, perhaps you should unsubscribe from them (if you don't find them valuable), either one-by-one or all at once^{[31](#)}. If you get a lot of service-related messages (like Twitter notifications^{[32](#)}), you should log-in to the particular service and turn off the notifications in the first place. Another way to handle service notifications is to create filters or rules (how you do them

depends of the e-mail application), to weed these kinds of messages out of your inbox.

- When you open an e-mail message, take a look at it and reply to it at once. If you suspect it will take more time to reply, schedule a task to do so in your task list, then archive the message. Just make sure to grab the URL of the e-mail message and add it as your reference next to your task list task description (this helps you to find the archived message easier).
- If you suspect that replying to the message will be too time-consuming, call the person instead.
- If the message contains an assignment, put it on your task list and schedule it (or if the situation requires, handle it right away). Once again, include the URL of the message for reference in your task description.

I have used the previous strategy and it has helped me keep my inbox clean. It's also worth mentioning that this strategy might not be suitable for everyone (say, you have to be available by e-mail all day). In that case, make sure to pick the parts from this section that suit you best to make your e-mail processing more effective.

10. Delegate the right way

There is only a limited volume of work we can handle effectively. When we are bombarded with too many tasks, our ability to do quality work diminishes and we end up being rushed, doing tasks too quickly without focusing on them enough.

That's why delegation is such an important tool when we want to make our hectic and busy work environment more controllable. Not only does it help to level the workload, it also gives us more time to focus on our important assignments, ensuring that unnecessary mistakes are weeded out during the work phase.

In order to make the delegation process as effective as possible, understand the following steps. First, make sure to document your work steps with enough detail so that the other person can actually complete a task with success.

Then, take a test drive of those instructions, first by following them yourself, and then by the person you are delegating your task to. This helps you to adjust the instructions so that they are easy to follow and don't contain any errors. After all, you want to make sure that the other person can work independently as much as possible, without having to ask you clarifying questions all the time.

Then, make sure to define the deadline for the delegated task, especially if you need it back within a certain time frame. Instead of saying that you want the job completed sometime next week, define an explicit deadline, like by next Thursday at 1pm.

The next step is to make the delegation process an active one. In other words, don't just ask a person to do a task and assume it's getting done, only to realize that you haven't heard anything from this person in ages. Instead, have a regular follow-up on your task (by phone or by e-mail), so that things move along smoothly.

Lastly, keep improving the delegation process on a continuous basis. For instance, you may realize that video-based instructions work better with some people, so you create those instead. Or you discover a new application

that automates one part of the process, making certain manual steps unnecessary.

Delegation is a powerful tool for improving your productivity and balancing your workload. If you decide to delegate some of your work, make sure that you spend enough time on these previous points to get the results you want.

11. Take breaks

I already mentioned taking breaks between working sessions in tip #2, but this time I'm going to give you some ideas about what to do on your breaks.

Before we begin, let's talk about the benefits of taking breaks in the first place. You may think that regularly detaching yourself from work is counter-productive, but it's totally the opposite. A study³³ made by the University of Illinois found that one's performance actually improves when the person takes breaks.

This is good news for a couple of reasons. First, when your focus improves, so does your productivity. Since you have good concentration on your tasks, you'll most likely make better progress on them. Also, when you know that a scheduled break is ahead of you, it makes your work more pleasant (because you know that you don't have to spend your whole day on your computer).

There is another nice benefit of taking breaks and that's the problem-solving capabilities. Imagine working intensely to solve a problem but not making any progress. At some point you decide to have a break and walk away from your computer.

Then, all of a sudden, the solution to your problem pops into your head while having a cup of coffee with your team members. So even if you leave your workspace, your brains still keep working on the solution, offering it to you when you least expect it.

For these reasons, breaks are important for your productivity. But what are the best ways to spend your break time? Consider these options:

- Make yourself a cup of coffee or tea
- Socialize with your colleagues or family members
- Meditate
- Take a nap (if you are working at home)
- Brief exercise (this depends of the length of the break you have)

- Eat a healthy snack
- Go outside and breathe some fresh air

These are just some of the ideas you can apply during your break. In general, try to have a break that energizes you, helping you to perform better on your assignments after the break.

12. Take care of the frogs right away

If there is one type of task that we tend to postpone more than anything else, it's those "frog" tasks.

In this context, the term "frog" was first coined by Mark Twain (and later popularized by Brian Tracy in his book, *Eat That Frog!*)³⁴, by saying³⁵ that you should "*Eat a live frog first thing in the morning and nothing worse will happen to you the rest of the day.*" In other words, if you take care of the most challenging task first thing in the morning, the rest of the day will be much smoother.

The issue with "frog" tasks is this: as long as this kind of assignment remains unfinished, you keep thinking about it all the time. What's even worse, the task grows bigger in your mind, making it seem worse than it actually is. Obviously, when you handle a task like this as soon as possible, you free up your mental energy and you can put your focus on something else instead.

So how do you eat a frog, then? Well, you can always copy my way of coping with a difficult tasks.

First, I prepare mentally for the thing I'm supposed to do. For instance, if I'd have to call an angry client, I'd go through the call in my head first. Then, I'd jot some notes down on paper related to the call, so that I'd have an idea of the topics I should talk about while on the phone.

Obviously, and as Mark Twain suggested, I'd take care of the task first thing in the morning. At the same time, it's understandable that this is not always possible. For instance, this particular client might not show up to the office until 11am, so it would be useless to try to reach him at 7am.

Finally, I'd imagine how I would feel after I had dealt with the situation. In the case of making a phone call, you can't always predict an outcome or what the other person might say to you. Nevertheless, you could still congratulate yourself after making the dreaded call, because it's behind you.

Besides, quite often we exaggerate the scariness of a task (like a phone call) inside our heads. For instance, whenever I had to make a call like in the

previous example, it usually went very smoothly and I felt good after the call.

13. Create checklists

Sometimes you'll have to make sure that a task meets certain requirements before it can be declared finished. This is where checklists come in handy.

A checklist is nothing more than a list of items that helps you remember to execute a task in a consistent manner³⁶. There are also other benefits of using checklists, like:

- Meeting the criterion of your task
- Making your work faster
- Creating predictable results for your tasks
- Documenting your process for when delegating your work
- Creating habits (making sure you do a certain task the same way every time)

While there are demanding jobs where a checklist is an important part of the work (airline pilots, surgeons, etc.), you can also take advantage of this tool in your everyday office work.

According to Atul Gawande, the author of *The Checklist Manifesto*³⁷, there are two types of checklists and you'll have to decide first which one to use, before creating your list:

1. READ-DO checklists
2. DO-CONFIRM checklists

In the case of READ-DO, the checklist acts like a recipe. First, you read the item on the list, then you act according to the item and then you move on to the next item.

The DO-CONFIRM checklist is a bit different. In this case, you do a task from your own memory (or from experience) and then at some point you consult your checklist to make sure that you did everything required.

There is also another difference between these two checklists and that's the level of detail you include in your list. For instance, if you need exact instructions³⁸ on how to do something to accomplish your task, choose a READ-DO checklist.

However, if you already know how to do something (for instance, packing for business travel³⁹), you can create a list where the items are on a generic level (like, pack a change of clothes). In this case, choose a DO-CONFIRM checklist.

Once you have decided the type of checklist you want to create, it's time to start putting your list together. To clarify your list further, put a title of your list at the top of the document. Then, based on your checklist selection (READ-DO or DO-CONFIRM), you can begin to itemize out the points on your list.

You can create either a paper-based checklist or an electronic one. I prefer electronic ones and storing the documents in one central location, like on Google Drive.

Once you have created your checklist, test it. This ensures that the items on your list make sense to you. You are also able to see whether you met all the necessary requirements related to your task, in order to declare it complete.

Remember that creating a checklist is not enough. You should also keep the list up-to-date based on any process changes or requirement changes. You can schedule this activity to your calendar, so that you remember to do it or use an application like [Siri](#) to remind you about the maintenance task.

14. Take a snapshot of your work before vacation

This next tip is especially for those who work at a cubicle. However, it can be applied to your own business too if you work at home.

Years ago, when I returned back to work after a four-week summer holiday, I encountered a problem: I didn't have a clue what was I supposed to do next. I had completely forgotten the tasks I worked on before my holiday.

It took me hours and hours to figure out what was I was supposed to do. After I finally put all the pieces together, that's when I made a decision: on the last day at work before my next vacation, I would write down all the necessary information related to the assignments I was working on. This way, returning back to work after vacation would be as smooth as possible.

So when the next vacation was about to start, I took a "snapshot" of the current work I was doing. In other words, I created a note on my computer's desktop, describing:

- The latest e-mail correspondence I have had.
- The calls I had made.
- The tasks I was currently working on and their statuses.
- Other important information I had to be aware of, when returning back to work.

When I eventually got back to the office after my vacation, my work day started out much smoother, since I knew instantly the overall situation in my work (i.e. where I left before the vacation) and what was I supposed to do.

In addition to having this snapshot document, you can also implement the steps (that fit your situation) I did before and after vacation.

PRE-VACATION:

- I cleaned my desk before leaving for vacation. This made my desk more welcoming when I returned back to work. However, I avoided doing (heavy) organizing of my work space before I left. Changing

the location of various items just before the vacation would have probably left me confused when I returned back to work.

- I let my colleagues know I was going to be on vacation. I did this for the colleagues sitting next to me, and I also called the project members I worked closely with (like a project manager) before leaving.
- To prevent work calls during the vacation, I transferred all the incoming desk phone calls to the switchboard. Then I let the switchboard personnel know how long I was away and who my substitute was during my vacation.
- I marked the vacation time on my online calendar, letting anyone who accessed it know that I was out of the office.
- I set an auto-reply message on my e-mail, telling people how long I was out of the office, why I was out of the office, and who my substitute was during the vacation.

POST-VACATION:

- I adjusted my sleeping rhythm to adapt to the work rhythm, just before getting back to work.
- I spent my first day catching up with everyone else and processing e-mails. In other words, I had a smooth transition back to work, without having to hurry or stress about anything.
- I forwarded calls back to my desk phone from the switchboard, took off the out of the office reply (by the way, you can also do this after [40](#) you have processed your e-mail first).
- My personal preference is to start my post-vacation work week on some day other than Monday. This helps me adjust back to work rhythm easier. Besides, when I start my work week say on Tuesday, the first week back goes by much quicker.

15. Focus on one thing at a time

Although multitasking may seem like a good strategy to follow, it is a myth. You end up splitting your focus over many tasks, thus working ineffectively⁴¹.

You can see this in action⁴², for instance, when you are having a phone call and trying to write an e-mail message at the same time. You either miss what the other person is telling you on the phone or end up creating an e-mail that doesn't make any sense.

So rather than trying to do too many things at once, switch over to a mindset of focusing *on just one thing* while you are working. After your task is done, move on to the next task. This helps you to process your task at hand much faster, since you are giving it 100% of your focus. Besides, the probability of errors decreases too, when you concentrate on one thing only.

To focus on one thing at a time, do the following:

- Split the task into smaller, manageable pieces. This gives you much better focus as you don't have to handle too big an entity at once.
- If necessary, create a plan to execute the task. For instance, you could find out that you can do a certain part of the task only after another part is completed first.
- Control the distractions around you as much as possible. In other words, close your e-mail application, avoid spending time online (unless it's necessary for your task) and mute your cell phone. You can even change to a more peaceful environment (like a meeting room), which eliminates the outside distraction very effectively.
- Take advantage of time blocking⁴³ when you do the task.

16. Control the busywork

Being busy can be sometimes a good thing, making you “kick some butt” and get work done.

Unfortunately, we are also all familiar with the negative side of being busy. The combination of too much work to do, with too little time, is a great way to stress yourself out.

But are there any effective ways to deal with busywork, so that you can be more in control of it? Consider these suggestions:

- Learn to say no⁴⁴. Or at the very least, make sure you set the right expectations towards the person who asks you to do something. For instance, you could say: “Yes I can do it, but only after I have finished this other task first.”
- If you are bombarded by multiple ASAP (as soon as possible) tasks by multiple people, figure out together whose work has the highest importance, then proceed with the agreed-upon priorities.
- I’ll scratch your back, if you scratch mine. In other words, if someone asks you to do a task, could you ask them to help you with your other task in return?
- To improve your work performance, create checklists (see tip #13).
- Make sure to understand the true costs if a project or task gets delayed. Perhaps this will help you identify the things you should focus on first.
- Be pessimistic with your time (see tip #4).
- If you are having a hard time focusing on your tasks, make sure to control the distractions first (see tip #3).

17. Know your tools (and your keyboard too!)

We have an accustomed way of using applications in our work. Unfortunately, these habits can sometimes be far from effective. To make your application usage smarter, apply these tips.

Learn keyboard shortcuts

We tend to operate our computer applications by using a mouse. While this is all simple and easy, learning common keyboard shortcuts makes your work easier and faster.

For instance, regular operations like copying (Mac: Command + C, PC: CTRL+C), pasting (Mac: Command + V, PC: CTRL+V), or cutting (Mac: Command + X, PC: CTRL+X) all have their own respective keyboard shortcuts to make your workflow more effective.

There are plenty of other shortcuts you could learn, and the appropriate ones depend on the application you are using. For instance, I learned that in Gmail you can compose a new message by just clicking the letter C (after enabling keyboard shortcuts in your Gmail settings). With this shortcut⁴⁵, I didn't have to use my mouse for this action anymore.

So seek out the common (and the application-specific) shortcuts and move away from mouse, as much as possible.

Learn more about the program you are using

Just recently I was working on a draft of my book and I needed to do some formatting, by capitalizing the first letters in my headings. Without thinking too much about it, I started doing this manually, header by header, word by word.

At some point, I got totally fed up with the manual labor. Fortunately, I found out that the application I was using (OpenOffice) had the capitalizing feature built-in.

This example just demonstrates the importance of knowing how to use your tools. Too often we do the work the hard way, while there are handy features built-in to our applications to make our work much easier.

Learn touch typing

I was totally against learning touch-typing in business college. I thought I was able to write much faster with two fingers, so I avoided learning touch typing. Fortunately, I gave touch typing a try and once I learned it, there was no turning back.

Now, 20 years later, I'm willing to say it has been a tremendous help in my everyday work, allowing me to finish my writing work much faster than my old two-fingered method.

To get started with touch typing, check out the article^{[46](#)} by WikiHow on this subject. You can also use a tool like Keybr^{[47](#)}, to teach you touch typing online.

Start your applications faster

Another way to speed up your computer usage is to use application launchers, which help you to start an application very quickly. One of the best ones I have seen so far is Alfred^{[48](#)} (available only on Mac).

Once you activate Alfred (by pressing Alt and Space simultaneously on your keyboard), it lets you enter the name of the application you'd like to start. Once the application is found on your computer, just click enter and the application starts.

Alfred comes with other handy features too (found in the PowerPack edition). But even without investing in the PowerPack version (which is very inexpensive), the application quick start feature alone can already make your day more effective.

There are alternatives for PC too. For instance, Launchy^{[49](#)} can launch documents and applications and navigate through web sites. Unfortunately, I haven't tried this application myself, so I don't know how well it works.

Log-in faster

The Internet is full of services that require a login before they can be accessed. Unfortunately, trying to remember all the possible user IDs and passwords becomes impossible, so that's when a password manager comes handy. This type of software helps you access those sites quicker.

The password tool I have been using is LastPass⁵⁰, but there are plenty of other password managers⁵¹ out there. So do some research first to find the best one for your needs.

Access websites faster

You can access a certain page on a website the hard way or the easy way. In the former, you go to the homepage of a website and click the links in the navigation to reach your destination.

A better way is to bookmark the exact page you access on a frequent basis. This method works, but eventually your list of bookmarks may grow so big that finding the right one becomes difficult. Yet, if you are fan of bookmarking and you want to access them from everywhere, I suggest moving your bookmarks into the cloud⁵².

Then again, what if you could get rid of bookmarks altogether?

For instance, I haven't bookmarked a site in years, but I have list of sites I access on a frequent basis. I do this by taking advantage of a Chrome extension called Speed Dial 2⁵³.

When you open a new tab in your browser, it lists all the sites that you have added to your speed dial list. Then, it's just a matter of clicking the icon (or the screen capture) of the website you are accessing and voila! With one click, the right page opens in front of your eyes.

18. Know how you spend your time on your computer

It's very easy to spend all day on the computer, only to realize that you haven't managed to do anything when the work day ends.

In this kind of situation, it's useful to start tracking your time to see how you actually spent your work day. There are plenty of tools⁵⁴ that can automate the time tracking task at least a bit. Nothing prevents you from doing the traditional time logging too, but taking advantage of tools makes this task much easier.

Once you know how you spend your days, start doing systematic changes so that the productivity ratio (the percentage of productive time) of your day increases.

For instance, when you look at the stats generated by the time tracking application, you may find you spend a lot more time on Facebook than you realized.

You could then ask yourself questions like:

- Why am I spending time there?
- Is my work so easy and unchallenging that I can spend time on Facebook all day?
- Could I limit the number of times I visit Facebook, to make it more like a reward after completing a task?

So after you have got the results from your tracking application, it's all about making some adjustments to your work routines, so that you can increase the productive hours of your work day.

Conclusion

We covered a lot of ways to make your work day more productive. While some of the tips were more geared towards cubicle workers, these same tips can be adjusted to work-at-home environments too.

Now it's your turn to put all this information into practice, but before you take action there are a couple of things to remember.

First, implement the one tip that helps you the most as it relates to your current productivity problem. In other words, don't try to implement everything at once, as this may lead to unnecessary stress and confusion.

Then, remember that in most of the cases you might have to tweak a certain tip a bit so it fits your needs. Our working styles, job descriptions, and work environments all differ, so one tip that might be a good fit for person A, might be a good one for person B. To get the most of the tips in this report, always find your personal approach to them.

Finally, what matters most is that you actually put these tips into action and really test them out. This is the only way you can make your days more organized and productive.

Cheers,

Timo Kiander

Questions and Comments

I'm happy to help you with any of the procrastination or productivity questions you have. Please feel free to send me an e-mail at:
timo@productivesuperdad.com.

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About the Author

Timo Kiander runs a productivity blog called [Smart Productive Work](#).

His blog helps work-at-home professionals on two levels: By becoming more effective at what they do at work and having a balanced lifestyle between their personal life and their business.

Timo is also into endurance sports. He has run 18 marathons so far, and has already lost count of how many triathlons he has participated in.

In his free time, he likes to spend as much time as possible with his wife and son.

Timo is very approachable and easy to get along with, so don't hesitate to contact him if you have any questions regarding this book (or any other matter) by sending him an e-mail at: timo@productivesuperdad.com.

